

# Putting children first

JIM NEWTON

IT WAS NEARLY a year ago that Philip Browning was named head of Los Angeles County's Department of Children and Family Services. He accepted the post with some reluctance — the department has a history of controversy, and has been battered again and again by reports of children dying in its care. Browning had been running DCFS on an interim basis, but when the county could not find a suitable permanent head, he yielded to the arm-twisting of Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky and took the job.

The department that Browning agreed to head was — and still is — riddled with problems. Paperwork sometimes overwhelms the best intentions of its staff; experienced social workers are often assigned to desk jobs, replaced by less-seasoned colleagues. Supervision is uneven and workloads unfairly distributed.

But Browning has already started addressing those issues. He completed a strategic

plan in September. Now, he's working on a new organizational structure and has begun to put more experienced workers back into the field. He's lobbying for better technology so that social workers can access records remotely. He's rotating field-office bosses, an unpopular move but one intended to smooth out uneven management.

One profoundly important shift has been Browning's approach to children. In recent years, the department has stressed the importance of keeping families together whenever possible. Browning argues that a child's safety should trump all other concerns, even when it means taking children from their parents.

"If we think the child is safe, we leave the child with the biological parents," he explained in the soft Southern accent that causes some to underestimate his toughness. "Sometimes, of course, that's just not possible."

Browning's more stringent approach has meant an increase in the number of chil-

## Philip Browning is shaking up DCFS. But can he reform the troubled agency?

dren removed from their homes. Last year, the agency filed 14,785 petitions, most of them in connection with detaining children, an increase from 13,481 the year before. What that means in raw terms is that the county last year removed a child from his or her home more than 200 times a week on average.

The hope is that children are protected once they're under the county's care, but the sad truth is that they face a capricious future. Some land with capable foster families, and perhaps will be adopted. Some are returned home to families that have recovered from the initial incident and will go on to raise them well. Others, however, are shuffled from one foster home or group facility to another, and grow up without any

sense of coherent, dependable family. Some are physically or sexually abused. Some die.

The other day, I talked to Leslie Heimov, executive director of the Children's Law Center, about the changes Browning is making in the department. When I laid out the approach he'd described to me, she agreed with many of his priorities. But she also talked about the frustrations she's had again and again in dealing with the county.

When asked for examples, she recounted a recent episode in which a 7-year-old girl, after years of bumping from home to home, eventually was placed in a stable home with her aunt. Unfortunately, the aunt lived in Lancaster, and DCFS had ordered that the child undergo physical therapy at Children's Hospital in Hollywood. That meant a long trip twice a week for the aunt, and she was forced to leave her other children in the care of her mother, who has a history of drug abuse and was not approved to babysit by DCFS. Social workers took the niece away. She was placed in yet another foster home, which officials assumed might be permanent but turned out not to be. Two days before Christmas, the little girl was moved again.

That's just one case, she noted, but anyone familiar with the system can describe dozens more like it every day.

"The department continues to put up barriers ... to taking care of kids," Heimov said. "They need to make their police work for every child, not just half or just the lucky ones."

Certainly, Browning recognizes that there is more to do. But one hint that events may be moving in the right direction is the attitude of the county supervisors. They notoriously pick on department heads and have battered more than one DCFS chief, but for the moment they seem uncharacteristically deferential.

Yaroslavsky calls Browning "the best turnaround artist in public administration." Browning hasn't done it yet, but there's finally some basis for hope.

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# Audit: Worker mileage overpayments costing L.A.

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By Rick Orlov Staff Writer

An audit of five Los Angeles agencies found \$325,000 was wasted in mileage reimbursements due to overpayments and lack of supervision, City Controller Wendy Greuel said Tuesday.

"There is troubling evidence that the city regularly overpays mileage reimbursement," Greuel said. "And, this is just the tip of the iceberg. My findings strongly indicate this could be happening in other city departments."

Greuel's review of the reim-

bursement sheets between 2009 and 2012 found the discrepancies in the Los Angeles Housing Department, Building and Safety, Public Works Bureau of Contract Administration, Public Works Bureau of Street Services, and the Department of Transportation.

The investigation found \$110,000 in overpayments and the loss of \$215,000 in cost savings.

The audit found one employee received \$30,252 in reimbursements, but had put in only four mileage statements.

"Across all departments sampled, mileage statements were often incomplete or inaccurate," Greuel said. "No documentation of insurance and valid driver's licenses were found in over half the instances investigated."

Councilman Dennis Zine, who chairs the City Council's Audits and Governmental Efficiency Committee, said he plans to call all city departments in to explain their policy as well as to determine if any of the employees were disciplined.

"I want to know what the general managers and the supervisors were doing," Zine said. "And, it's disturbing that it always comes back to some of the same departments that have continuing problems. I think this is negligence on the part of the general managers."

"This is not brain surgery. They should be able to develop a system to make sure employees are appropriately reimbursed, but that they aren't ripping off the city," Zine said.

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## Brown challenges court oversight of California prisons

BY DON THOMPSON The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO -- Reducing California's inmate population further to meet a federal order would endanger public safety and require the state to ignore its own sentencing laws, Gov. Jerry Brown warned Tuesday as he challenged judges to reject those options. After years of changes, the Democratic governor said California would have to grant shorter sentences to inmates convicted of violent or serious felonies to meet the court's mandate.

He also called for restoring the state's authority over its prison system, vowing to take that battle to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary.

The prison population cap was imposed in 2009 after federal judges blamed crowding for dismal conditions that violated inmate constitutional rights and resulted in the death of an average of one inmate a week due to neglect or poor care.

The judges gave the state until June to reduce the population of California's 33 adult prisons by about 33,000 inmates, to a total of 110,000 inmates.

"Under protest we're offering some options for further release. But make no mistake about it: Releasing prisoners who were convicted of serious and dangerous crimes is not in the public interest," Brown said at a Capitol news conference where he called for the judges to rescind the population cap order.

California already is sending thousands of less-serious offenders to local jails instead of state prisons under a 14-month-old state law designed to reduce crowding and prison spending. But the state is still set to fall short of the court-imposed population cap.

"It's not a smart idea or a sound idea to add further to the burden of the counties," Brown said.

Brown's administration said in court documents filed overnight Monday that it could comply with the court's current population cap only if the federal court waives numerous state laws and "orders the outright early release of inmates serving prison terms for serious and violent felonies."

The plan includes granting early release credits to "second strike" inmates who have serious prior convictions, the state said. State sentencing laws would also have to be changed, and inmates who would normally serve nine months or less in state prison would have to spend their time in county jails.

The state also could lower the threshold for sending inmates to firefighting camps, expand work furlough, restitution centers and alternative custody programs, and keep more inmates in private prisons in other states.

Attorneys representing inmates' welfare said the state could adopt those changes without endangering the public, while saving money.

"Incarceration is the most expensive of all the options for taking care of people in the criminal justice system," said Michael Bien, one of the lead attorneys for inmates.

Attorneys also argued in their court filing that, while conditions have improved, inmates still are needlessly dying of neglect and mentally ill inmates go untreated.

Brown's reasoning also drew swift criticism from reform groups.

"Rather than implement the kinds of sentencing reforms that would significantly reduce the number of people needlessly behind bars in California, Gov. Brown has instead committed to business as usual," said Allen Hopper, director of criminal justice and drug policy for the American Civil Liberties Union of California.

Spending more money on prisons means less money for other needs such as public schools, he said in an email.

Brown argued that the conditions that led to the court oversight -- extremely poor medical and mental health care for inmates -- have been solved and prisoners now receive care exceeding constitutional levels.

Brown ended a 2006 emergency proclamation by former Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger that let the state send thousands of inmates to private prisons in other states. Brown's move cleared the way for them to be returned to California starting in July.

"California is a powerful state. We can run our own prisons. And by God, let those judges give us our prisons back. We'll run them right," Brown said.

NEXT STORY: Competency trial scheduled for defendant accused of sexually assaulting daughter